

Developing Knowledge of Coaching

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School-based coaching for literacy teachers has taken on an important role in school reform in recent years. Although the literature contains numerous and compelling descriptions of the perceived, positive effects of mentoring (Shulman, 2004), reviews of the literature base on mentoring and/or coaching over the past 20 years have consistently identified the need for the development of empirically-based knowledge of mentoring (e.g., Colley, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 1996; Gray & Gray, 1985; Hawkey, 1997; Little, 1990; Merriam, 1983; Wang & Odell, 2002). Qualitative research is needed in order to move discussions of mentoring from the abstract to an experiential level (Colley, 2002) in contrast to the prevailing "manic optimism" (Elmore, 1989, cited in Little, 1990, p. 297) with which mentoring and coaching are typically viewed.

A large and influential body of research provides teacher educators with insights concerning teachers' thinking, planning, and decision-making (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001). The identification of teachers' knowledge and inquiry into how this knowledge develops is an extremely complex set of questions as well as a highly consequential area of inquiry. "It is within the context of teachers' thought processes that curriculum is interpreted and acted upon; where teachers teach and students learn" (Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 255).

The mentoring and coaching of teachers has become a highly

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systematic and officially recognized practice (Colley, 2002). To paraphrase Clark and Peterson (1986), it is within the context of coaches' thought processes that the hope of instructional reform is interpreted and enacted, where coaches coach and teachers learn. Little is currently known, however, concerning the assumptions about knowledge, learning, and teaching underlying the work of coaches or mentors (Wang & Odell, 2002). The case study reported here addresses this area of research through an analysis of the working hypotheses and themes for coaching articulated by two school-based, primary grade literacy coaches over the course of one school year.

Theoretical Framework

The current study is based on several strands of research into teacher knowledge, and describes the development of pedagogical content knowledge for the practice of coaching for two school-based, primary grade literacy coaches. The rich history of research on teacher knowledge can be characterized as a gradual reconciliation of theory and practice; a narrowing between propositional and practical viewpoints on knowledge development (Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001). In 1987 Shulman proposed seven categories for a knowledge base of teaching: (a) content knowledge, (b) general pedagogical knowledge, (c) curriculum knowledge, (d) pedagogical content knowledge, (e) knowledge of learners and their characteristics, (f) knowledge of educational contexts, and (g) knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values (p. 8).

Teacher knowledge, however, is not static. The research on teachers has found that experienced teachers "create new knowledge within the crucible of the classroom" (Grossman, 1995, p. 22). Expert teachers possess richly elaborated knowledge that is specialized, domain-specific, and organized around event structures beyond the novice teacher's focus on surface features (Carter, 1990). Teachers are able to transform their own subject-specific content knowledge into pedagogical representations that enable them to make strong connections with the prior knowledge and dispositions of those they teach (Shulman & Quinlan, 1996). This transformation is a crucial aspect of pedagogical reasoning, allowing for the building of "the capacity of a teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students" (Shulman, 1987, p. 15). Indeed, accomplished reasoning depends on the ability to link several processes across rich, domain-specific knowledge (Shulman & Quinlan, 1996).

The current study applies these findings from research on teacher

knowledge to an investigation of the development of knowledge about coaching. This case study describes two school-based, primary grade literacy coaches' development of both a propositional and practical/procedural knowledge base within the framework of their coaching of a kindergarten and first grade teacher for small group reading lessons. For the purposes of this study, the content knowledge of coaches consists of their theories concerning literacy processes and instruction, while their pedagogical content knowledge lies in their understanding of how to teach their peers to teach effective literacy lessons. This study investigated the specific ways in which two school-based literacy coaches worked to develop a richly elaborated knowledge base and set of interpretive propositions (Carter, 1990) for their coaching practice. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What working propositions and themes did the coaches articulate?
2. In what ways did the coaches' stated propositions and themes change or remain stable over the school year?

Method

This study reports an analysis of a series of interviews conducted across three cycles with two school-based literacy coaches. Each of the three cycles, conducted for a larger study (Gibson, 2002), included observing and videotaping a guided reading lesson, audiotaping a subsequent coaching session, videotaping a second guided reading lesson, and audiotaping interviews with each coach and teacher.

Participants

Two experienced teachers, each working in their second year as a primary grade literacy coach at their respective elementary schools within a small, urban public school district participated in this study. Prior to moving into their coaching positions, Pamela (pseudonyms used) had 19 years of teaching experience in first through sixth grade, and Karla had 17 years of teaching experience in first through third grade. Both coaches had moved directly and voluntarily from primary grade classroom teaching experience into their new role as literacy coaches within their own school sites two years prior to the study. For the activities described in this study, Pamela provided coaching for Amy, a second-year first grade teacher. Karla provided coaching for Karen, a kindergarten teacher with 25 years of primary grade teaching experience. The coaching episodes for this study concerned the two teachers' guided

reading instruction, in which the teacher works with a small, homogeneous group of students, selects and introduces new books to the group, supports children while they read the new text, and teaches effective reading strategies (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). During the interviews, however, each of the two coaches also commented on her coaching experiences with all K-2 teachers at her school site.

Two years prior to the start of the study, Pamela and Karla had both completed a university training program in preparation for their new roles as literacy coordinators. This 7-week, Literacy Collaborative¹ training program focused on developing each literacy coordinator's knowledge of a specific instructional framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), and each literacy coordinator was required to implement this framework in her own classroom during the year of training. This framework includes interactive read-alouds, shared and interactive writing, word study mini-lessons, content area connections, guided reading, independent language and literacy work, and writing workshops.

The training program addressed participants' knowledge of coaching indirectly during initial training and more directly toward the end of the training year. During initial training, for example, the university trainers provided coaching sessions for the literacy coordinators themselves through videotaped lessons and peer feedback. As the training year progressed, however, the focus on coaching expertise became more overt. The literacy coordinators were presented with a standard sequence of activities for coaching interactions (i.e., preconference, lesson observation, coaching session with written goals developed, and follow-up meeting) and encouraged to build trust with teachers, focus on the teachers' goals, and avoid providing evaluative information to the building principal. Beyond their year of training, each literacy coordinator presented staff development class sessions and in-class coaching for the three to five K-2 teachers at her own school site.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three interviews were conducted for this study between November and April with each of the two coaches. Each of the interviews was structured both as stimulated recall (Bloom, 1953; cited in Keith, 1988) and in a standardized open-ended interview format (Patton, 1990). Each of the interviews was transcribed, and the transcriptions were then checked for accuracy. The stimulated recall interviews provided retrospective reports of the coaches' thought processes using explicit and informationally rich cues (Shavelson, Webb, & Burstein, 1986) for a specific coaching session. As each interview began, a segment of the audiotape of the coaching session for that cycle was played for the coach.

The statements resulting from these interviews consisted of retrospective reports of the coaches' professional craft knowledge rather than an accurate recall of their decision-making (Keith, 1988).

The interviews were analyzed both as two individual cases and for each of the three cycles of data collection. Within the first phase of data analysis a set of broad, salient themes was identified through initial, multiple readings of each interview transcript. A set of codes was developed for the analysis of coaches' interpretive propositions. Where these initial codes either overlapped or were not adequate descriptions for any portions of the coaches' statements, the coding scheme was refined. All previously coded transcripts were recoded using the following six codes:

1. Working propositions regarding how coaches should coach;
2. Explanations of the coach's understanding of instructional theory for literacy processes;
3. Explanations as to why the coach had conducted the coaching session in a particular way;
4. Descriptions of changes in the coach's understanding of, or procedures used for, coaching;
5. Descriptions of challenges the coach had encountered in her coaching practice;
6. Characterizations of the teachers made by the coach, and any descriptions of shifts or strengths and weaknesses in guided reading instruction.

This coding process was designed to capture the complex, multifaceted, and specific nature of the coaches' propositional and procedural statements within each cycle. Working from printouts for each of the six codes, sorted by both case and cycle, one summary for each code for each case and cycle was created. The interview transcripts were also examined for the coaches' interpretive and procedural propositions. Finally, each of these summaries was analyzed for shifts in the ways in which each coach articulated her conceptualization for each of the identified themes, in concert with her own propositional and procedural statements.

Limitations

This report of a case study analysis is made on the basis of two coaches' statements regarding their practice. As such, it describes self-report data that may certainly contain distortions. Each of the coaches undoubtedly experienced some degree of anxiety as she was asked to describe her coaching decisions. The author did not participate in any direct way or at any time in the guided reading lessons, coaching sessions, or Literacy Collaborative training program. The degree to which coaching decisions

ultimately result in improved student achievement is an important question needing further research. This study, however, did not measure the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the coaching interactions themselves, nor of the specific literacy instruction recommended by the coaches.

Results

The findings of this study describe the evolving nature of (a) the recurring and central themes that describe the coaches' practice, and (b) the relationship of these themes to the coaches' interpretive propositions about coaching. These findings are, of course, highly situated within the specific contexts encountered by two particular coaches as they endeavored to make sense of their coaching role and move towards expertise. Pamela and Karla utilized three recurring themes within their talk about their practice: agendas, readiness, and the nature of change. What follows is a description of each particular theme as well as its relationship to the interpretive propositions stated by the two coaches.

Agendas

Both coaches described a tension between her own "agenda" regarding what topics should be addressed in each coaching session and what the teacher talked about and/or requested assistance with. Pamela and Karla each revised her way of talking about these agendas, however, across the year of the study. Within Cycle 1, Pamela articulated a general level of awareness of the teacher's agenda:

I don't know if I'm more observant but I listen more to their agenda than I did before. And I'm much better at finding the positive even if you have to dig for that positive.

Pamela's conceptualization across the study, however, shifted in Cycle 2 to finding ways to discuss both her own and Amy's agendas within coaching sessions, and then to her proposition in Cycle 3 that it is important to conduct coaching conversations in ways that integrate her own agenda with that of the teacher:

I'm a better listener to what they're telling me. Because I know I have my agenda. They have their agenda. And I need to incorporate theirs more. I need to listen to them. And what do you want help with? I know what you need help with. What do you want me to help you with? And then just kind of meshing the two and going with it.

Pamela articulated a set of related interpretive propositions regarding how coaches should go about their practice:

1. Coaches should not "just tell teachers what to do."
2. Coaches should work their own agendas (based on needed points for instructional improvement) into the coaching conversation "any little way that you can."
3. Coaches need to know how to question teachers regarding their own agenda for instructional improvement and "mesh it with their own."

Karla emphasized the personal nature of coaching throughout all three interviews, entailing a personal risk and the ability to "open up." Her talk about agendas shifted across the three cycles of the study from (1) an emphasis on "a mutual aspect" to coaching that will result in better communication, to (2) deciding to let Karen open each coaching conversation herself in order to see where her agenda was for that lesson, and to (3) the need for her and Karen to develop common understandings regarding what specific improvements in instruction were needed:

I would look at it probably as a common understanding about what kinds of shifts need to happen.... When I'm taking notes I try to write down teacher language [and] student response. And that way I can focus on what the kids did, and what Karen said to make that happen. So hopefully it's kind of nonthreatening. And I've got it right in front of me, so I can view it and say, "Here's what you said and look what she did. What made that happen?"

Like Pamela, Karla articulated a set of related interpretive propositions:

1. The focus for a coaching conversation should be on where the teacher has requested help.
2. Coaches should listen to the teacher's talk carefully, and then know how to move from the teacher's points to what they want to address.
3. Coaches should not just tell teachers what was "right or wrong" in their teaching, but direct the conversation in ways that develop mutual understanding of any needed improvement.

Both Pamela and Karla appear to have shifted their understandings, then, by moving from a rather polarized viewpoint as to whether the coach or teacher should control the choice of topics for coaching conversations, to an emphasis on the co-constructed nature of coaching conversations.

Readiness

Pamela and Karla both made statements indicating that they conceived of shifts in teachers' understandings along a developmental path. A common statement from both coaches in Cycle 1 was that particular teachers were not "ready" for coaching:

Because I think some of our teachers, as I think about last year and the coaching that I did, they weren't ready to be coached.... So I kind of sit back and now let me think where they really are.

Across the three cycles of the study, the coaches' interview statements indicated shifts in the ways they viewed the readiness of the teachers they coached. Pamela's description shifted from the need to coach to where the teachers "really are" and her statements that some teachers weren't ready to be coached, to the following interpretive propositions:

1. The coach should "step back to modeling" effective instruction for teachers.
2. Co-constructed records of coaching interactions should be made so that teachers remember what they need to improve in their teaching from one coaching session to the next.
3. Coaches need to articulate points for improvement to each teacher "many times, many different ways, for everybody to hear what you're saying."

In Cycle 3, for example, Pamela stated:

And usually in the next time I'm with the teacher I'll say, "Okay, now remember we talked about this and this is what you said you were going to work on. And this is what I'm going to be watching for." So that [as] I verbalize it, they hear it again.

Across the three cycles, Karla described the following hypotheses:

1. Coaches need to "step back," even to the stage of just gathering materials.
2. It is important for coaches to know "where teachers are in their own learning" and "back up" to get basic lesson routines in place.
3. Coaches should script the teacher's use of language and the students' responses during the lesson and then ask the teacher to reflect on the "why" or "what made that happen?"

Pamela and Karla appeared to have developed a multifaceted, procedurally based understanding of the varying needs of teachers by the third cycle of this study, moving beyond the statement that "teachers aren't ready." Both coaches, however, continued to articulate propositions indicating that coaches should make careful decisions about what to talk to each teacher about at any given point in time:

- Coaches should not try to address everything that a teacher could improve in any one coaching session.
- Coaches need to know how to identify a specific focus for the coaching discussion that will best help the teacher to move forward in his/her understanding of effective teaching.

The Nature of Change

Both of the coaches made direct statements describing their views on the nature of the change process that they were asking teachers to engage in. These comments emphasized the difficult and slow nature of change, the teachers' resistance to (or degree of discomfort with) coaching, and the need to coach in ways that would cause teachers to be reflective about their practice.

Pamela and Karla both commented on the difficulties they perceived due to teachers' resistance or lack of comfort with the coaching process. Pamela stated that she found teachers to be very resistant to coaching. She expressed surprise that teachers weren't all "just doing it." In Cycle 1 Karla stated that teachers felt uncomfortable or threatened by coaching, and she struggled to find specific ways to coach that would be nonthreatening to teachers. The two coaches described the learning they were asking of teachers as complex and difficult, stating that teachers need time to take on everything:

To get that deep level of understanding about, just a book introduction, I think is hard. Last year, if they were doing an introduction, I was happy. I don't think they know the power of that introduction yet. But as we're reading and talking more, they'll say "Oh, now I know what you mean."

As the study progressed, Karla and Pamela began to articulate their perception of the need to get teachers to be more self-reflective in order to overcome resistance and improve instruction. As Karla said,

I want her to be self-reflective and make these decisions and be confident in making those decisions without [asking] "What would Karla do? What does Karla think?" And that's not what I want. I want her to be empowered with her own thinking about what she can decide to do or not to do.

As the two coaches reflected on the difficult nature of both coaching and instructional improvement, they shifted to an emphasis on guiding teachers to be self-reflective, and articulated propositions related to this theme:

- The coach should not give his/her own opinion as to what the teacher should do.
- Coaches should guide teachers to figure out for themselves where and how their teaching should improve.

Discussion

This study has identified specific changes in the working propositions or pedagogical content knowledge for coaching articulated by two school-based literacy coaches across a one-year period. The two coaches whose

experiences and interpretive processes are reported here appeared to be working their way toward a more richly elaborated set of understandings for their role as coaches, through both a set of salient and central themes and working hypotheses or propositions. The two coaches reflected on, and shifted, their understandings of the tensions between the coach and teachers' agendas, issues of readiness for coaching, and the nature of the change process for instructional reform. There is evidence, for example, that the two coaches shifted across the year to an emphasis on (1) the co-constructed nature of coaching conversations, (2) a multifaceted and procedurally based understanding of the varying needs of teachers, and (3) the need to guide teachers to be self-reflective.

"As N. L. Gage (1978) is fond of reminding us, case studies can prove only that something is possible, not that is it probable. Yet invoking possibility itself can be a virtue" (Grossman, 1990, p. 146). It has not been the purpose of this study to identify where the two coaches' understandings were accurate or inaccurate, naïve or expert, or even generalizable to the work of other literacy coaches. Instead, this study describes two school-based literacy coaches' thinking processes across one school year's worth of coaching experiences, and captures the nonstatic nature of their coaching knowledge. Many of the specific experiences, themes, and interpretive propositions of these two coaches undoubtedly occurred because of the specific contexts in which they worked.

The findings reported on here do imply, however, that experienced teachers should not be expected to take on the role of a school-based literacy coach based solely on their own, existing knowledge base for effective literacy instruction. Instead, it is probable that every experienced teacher who takes on the coaching role (observing lessons and providing feedback to teachers in individual coaching sessions) will experience a set of specific and challenging issues requiring learning and growth. The nature of the shifts in pedagogical content knowledge that were articulated by the two coaches in this study provide an indication that learning how to coach effectively is likely to be at least as challenging and complex an endeavor as learning to teach is, and requires professional and cognitively demanding work.

Note

¹The Literacy Collaborative is a service mark of The Ohio State University.

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